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Harvard Gothic

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Around eight o'clock on the evening of October 22, 1954, about two thousand people, hoping to get into Sanders Theater to hear a lecture by the British historian, Arnold Toynbee, formed a line outside Memorial Hall. But Sanders Theater was much too small and over fifteen hundred had to be turned away. Most left quietly. Others were angry. And a few found a way in and had to be forcibly removed before Professor Toynbee could begin his talk. I remember it well because I was one of the gate-crashers.

My name is Roger Rath and by profession I am a Biblical archeologist. Though born in America and schooled at Harvard, I've lived most of my life either here in Jerusalem or at some dig in the countryside of Israel. My first book was published in 1963. There have been a dozen since. Today most scholars, whether they agree with me or not, agree that few men alive know the Holy Land as well as I. Yet, the truth is that if I hadn't crashed that lecture, I wouldn't be here. That's the night my story begins.

And it begins with my decision not to attend the Toynbee lecture. October 22, 1954 was right in the middle of the first semester of my senior year, and I was so worried about graduating with highest honors that I left my two roommates standing in a line just beginning to form, and trudged back across Harvard Yard toward our Dunster House rooms to begin my nightly workout with irregular Greek verbs. That was the way I was then. The Sixties had a phrase for it. Up tight.

Yet I hadn't gotten past the first flashcard when my eyes wandered to a copy of that Sunday's *Christian Science Monitor* lying on my bed. Copper Scroll Contains Treasure, shouted the headline. Just ten years after the first Qumran discoveries, Dead Sea Scrolls were still being found. But until that moment, they'd never interested me. No, I'd chosen Greece, an antiquity more temperate in its climate, rational in its beliefs and more germane, I thought, to our Anglo-American culture.

This find, however, held my attention. Instead of the usual eschatological hopes, some ancient Jew had scratched on a copper sheet a list of buried treasure and the directions, albeit at that moment undecipherable, for finding it. What was that treasure? Artifacts. Things saved from the Temple just before its destruction, things like the Ashes of the Red Heifer used by the priests in their purification rites or balsam oil for the anointing of Israel's kings or the first tabernacle supposedly built by Aaron himself.

I remember the feeling this article started in me, the feeling that the past was alive and I could live in it. Yes, I actually felt the Roman siege beginning. The sacred things must be hidden, a

record kept of their hiding places and that record hidden also. For a moment I became a real Jew. It had all been gibberish before, rules and eschatology. But here was something I could touch. In an instant I had my coat on and was out the door heading back toward Memorial Hall and Arnold Toynbee.

Why? What did I think the Englishman had to tell me? Perhaps it was just the excitement of my fellow students. All week long I'd heard about him. A savant with a brilliant war record, he seemed almost a prophet to them, a man who might grasp the horrors of our recent past and show us a way not to repeat them. This was 1954, a time of post-war adjustment, a time when the conscience of the world was still wrestling with what it had just done to itself even as it tried to avoid what it seemed about to do.

I know I personally hadn't come to grips with the past. A few years before I'd stared wide-eyed at newsreels of the emaciated dead piled beyond imagination. The question of how human beings could do this to each other was easy. We'd been conditioned to believe the Nazis were not human. But the question of how the victims could let it happen, could die that way, not fighting, not running, was harder. After all, I was one of them. And after a while, I could not and would not look. The Holocaust buried itself in me.

I think it was that way for many of my peers. We'd seen something beyond our understanding and were afraid. For my generation all intellectual endeavor, political, philosophical or literary, was really the pursuit of safety. That's why I'd chosen ancient Greece. Yet the article on the Copper Scroll had made me braver. But finding it had also made me late and the line of people waiting to get in now stretched across two blocks, doubled back and ended on the other side of Memorial Hall itself.

Because Sanders Theater seats only four hundred and my roommates were already inside, I knew I had no chance. Yet I went to the end of the line and stood beside the glass doors of the building's locked Kirkland Street entrance. In a few minutes my place showed its only advantage. I could see into the lobby and so knew before anyone ahead of me when they closed the doors. In a moment the only ones left in the lobby were a few campus policemen. Then the clock in the Memorial Hall bell tower began to toll.

It was eight. The lecture was beginning, the crowd dispersing. I couldn't believe it. I love Memorial Hall. Whenever I return to Cambridge, I still find the sight of its gothic mass pleasing. But that cold October night it was no pleasure. It sat there hopelessly impenetrable, a cruciform hulk, a red brick fortress, a stain-glass citadel. And I had only myself to blame. I should have gone

when I had the chance. I was a frightened little grind who deserved nothing more than his flashcards.

As it turned out, fear and the ensuing hesitation caused by fear, were just what was needed. Classical wisdom has it that a man's character is his fate. I know if I hadn't delayed, if I had stayed with my roommates, I never would have seen them. But there they were, no more than twenty feet away, four males in black hats and overcoats and a female in a camel's hair coat. They must have been behind me all along, bunched around a firedoor located at the end of the building. What are they doing? I wondered.

They were trying to open it. The handleless firedoor, not made to be opened from the outside, had not closed completely. By working their fingers into the crack where its edge imperfectly met the jamb, they had gotten a collective grip on it, and I watched them struggle until I saw that they had done it and that the girl was waving at me to come on. I did and inside, to my amazement, she hugged me, then stepped back into the light that was filtering through the door's opaque glass panel.

"Nita!" I shouted. "What are you doing here?" Nita was my cousin. She was a senior at Barnard and should have been in New York. But I didn't give her a chance to answer. Instead I hugged her again. What can I say about Nita?

In the Twenties our parents had begun married life with high hopes. In the Thirties those hopes were dashed by a worldwide financial disaster, and two sisters who never got along, had to unite in shared housing found for them by their brother. The only man with a job, Uncle Ben worked for the Hanover Manufacturer's Trust as an estate manager and was able, at least for the colder three quarters of the year, to get us into the Long Island summer homes of the rich. Our two families lived rent-free as caretakers.

That's where Nita and I grew up, in drafty mansions with huge forbidden rooms full of ghostly sheet-covered furniture and without central heat. We didn't care. There was always the beach. There on Long Island's windy shores, we built our castles, ran our races and threw our balls. Later, when the war came, we scavenged the life jackets, cabin doors and sailor hats sent us by German submarines. And later still, in the marsh grass between the damp dunes, we revealed to each other the secrets of our bodies.

"Have you come to hear Toynbee?" I asked breathlessly.

"Yes," she answered, then slipped from my arms and turned to the others. They were as big a surprise as she. We'd always been contemptuous of such people. "Let me introduce you to my friends," she said.

There were four of them and they wore the traditional beards and ear curls beneath their black hats. One by one I shook their hands. Yet I'm afraid my distaste for their orthodox dress was

apparent. I'm ashamed to admit it but at the time they seemed to me the worst kind of fanatics. And from the looks on their faces I could tell my distaste for them was surpassed only by their contempt for me and all that was secular. Today I would have to admit they were right about the Harvard snob I was then.

"The stairs go down," one of them said. Though we had gotten inside, it was only to the upper landing of a stairway that led we knew not where.

"Watch your step," warned another as the first began to descend into the darkness.

"Don't fall," said the third and the second disappeared.

"You next," said the fourth who was standing behind me. Nita took my hand.

"Come on," she urged and we shuffled to the edge of the first step to begin our descent.

Because it happened so quickly, I didn't question what we were doing. After all, we'd gotten into Memorial Hall and that was something. And only after we reached bottom did I remember my pipe lighter. It was a Beattie and, among pipe-smoking Harvard undergraduates, considered a necessity. It's uniqueness was the metal tube that passed through its flame. When the tube reached a critical temperature, it bent the fire so that it jetted horizontally and could be aimed downward into a pipe bowl.

I took it out of my coat pocket and stroked its wheel. Ah, there was an eerie sight, three wide-eyed Hebraic faces floating in darkness. And it was even eerier when my lighter jetted and they broke into smiles, their teeth surfacing on the dark puddles of their beards. They were delighted with my fire and wanted it to lead the way. Where? Upstairs into Sanders Theater and Arnold Toynbee. I shook my head. Suddenly I was doubtful about being there at all. I could get into a lot of trouble. Besides, it couldn't be done.

"Its's built like a church," I explained. "We're not under the theater. It's in the apse on the other side of the transept. We're under the nave."

"Then you know the building," said Nita quietly.

I know if she hadn't been there I would have refused. It was impossible. How could we get from the basement up into the theater? But she was there, her face imploring, her thin hand on mine that held the light. So I agreed and, to give us all some hope, told them to be on the look-out for the floor-plan whose display I knew was mandatory in all Massachusetts public buildings. We started down the corridor.

"What is it?" one of them asked.

"Don't know," said another.

We'd moved forward only a few feet when we came upon a

large room whose walls, the instant of our entry, seemed to burst into flame.

"What's that noise?" asked Nita.

As soon as I heard the cooing I realized where we were. Unlikely as it seems now, and due no doubt to a post-war lack of space, in 1954 the basement of Memorial Hall housed the laboratory of Dr. B.F. Skinner, famed experimental psychologist and inventor of the Skinner Box. What we were looking at was a wall of Skinner Boxes, rectangular glass containers each the size of a ten gallon fish tank. They were piled floor-to-ceiling and each contained not fish but the reflected jet of my lighter.

"What's that smell?" Nita asked.

"Pigeons," I answered. To my left I could just make out a large wooden coop behind whose chicken-wire door stirred the cooing experimental subjects.

"Pigeons?" they asked almost in unison. So I explained where we were and what the boxes were used for and then about Skinner's idea of re-enforcement. Today I think of B.F. Skinner as intellectual hogwash, an animal trainer at best, an animal torturer more likely. But back then I must have taken him quite seriously. And I was showing off in the only way I knew how. I was being didactic.

"Over here! Bring the light!"

That was the second time I heard his voice, the one who had been behind us on the stairs. I could tell by the way Nita let go of my hand but kept her eyes on mine that he meant something to her. She was smiling at me, an affectionate but patronizing smile, as if to say you're still the same Roger, that while you've been talking someone's been acting and that we really don't care about your Psych 101 class.

So she took my lighter and brought it to him. And we followed her, walked through the lab and further up a narrow corridor to where he was. Unlike the other three who were small, kinky-haired and dark, this one was tall and his beard blonde though there was no mistaking he was a Jew.

"The floorplan," he announced as he pointed at the wall. And there it was in an oak frame and under glass. There was supposed to be an emergency light above it. But I remember my lighter as being the only light.

"We're here under the center hall," he said.

"Transept," I corrected.

"Look!" cried my cousin.

"What?" asked the young man beside me.

"The toilets!" she shouted.

"Toilets!" Even through their beards you could see their faces wrinkling with disgust. And to have it announced by a woman

too. It was as if they'd come in contact with menstrual blood. Ach, I'm afraid I still don't have much patience with the orthodox. Not that kind, anyway.

"But look!" Nita jammed her finger into the map. "There are stairs going up."

I used to wonder who was responsible for this twist of my fate. It turned out to be the Dante translator, Charles Eliot Norton. President of Harvard just after the Civil War, Norton campaigned hard for Memorial Hall as a monument to the school's war dead. And it was he who insisted on Gothic architecture as the only architectural style for a Christian society. But it was also the most expensive and by the end, to cut costs, stairs were put in so that two floors could share the same plumbing.

"And they come up inside the theater!"

I remember standing in front of the floorplan trying not to believe my eyes. You'd think they would have put them in the lobby. But for some reason Sanders Theater's Men's and Ladies' Rooms are inside the theater itself, in those short entrance halls just to either side of the stage. Oh God, I thought, let the doors be locked.

"This way! It's not locked!" The Men's Room was locked. The Ladies' Room was not. I hesitated. Nita waited for me at the top. "Hurry!"

But once up there I hung back and stepped out only to peek around the corner at the stage. There was Arnold Toynbee. Because of the angle he couldn't see the Ladies Room door. But the sudden appearance of four Jews in beards, black coats and hats entering stage right must have been terrifying. In mid-sentence he stopped, his eyes going wide, his mouth opening as if to scream.

For a moment it was terrifying. Then it wasn't. It was funny. For there seemed to be young rabbis scampering in every direction, shouting to each other in a strange tongue, while campus police, fat sweating Irishmen with huge red faces, chased them down, all to the cheers of the smart-alec Harvard audience.

"Over here!" the students shouted. "Here's one!" It took only a few minutes to restore order.

But it was enough time to allow me to settle with Nita among the standing-room crowd at the back. I remember my heart pounding and my eyes unable to return the gaze of my laughing friends sitting toward the front. But we'd made it and when all was quiet again, I was looking down at Arnold Toynbee. He was smiling at us now and making a joke of it. Tall, thin with iron gray hair and piercing eyes like an eagle, he seemed the perfect man to represent an empire, even a dying one like the British Empire.

And when he was ready he swept us up through time, through

twenty-one civilizations, through Sumer and Akkad, Babylon and Egypt, through advances and decays, challenges and responses, until we were high enough to see the Roman Empire and our own era as if they were side by side. And in the doom of one he read us the doom of the other. This was Toynbee's dialectic, the clash of civilizations. Then he took us even higher to show us the new civilization that was bound to rise to a new spiritual height upon the ruins of the old.

It's old hat now. It was old hat then. But not to me. That night it was new, not what I'd come for perhaps, yet somehow better. How had I missed the drama of history? I'd taken the right courses. I just hadn't listened in the right way. So when it was over, while Nita went looking for her friends, I joined the crowd gathering around the stage. Toynbee was answering questions. I remember someone asking him who he thought had made the greatest contribution to the intellectual history of the West.

"Augustine," he answered without hesitation, "Bishop of Hippo."

"Why?" someone else asked and there was a hush as the historian went on to explain his choice.

"Imagine the times," he began. "The mind of the Western World on the verge of re-creating itself. Hellenized Christians and Oriental Manichees battling for control." He paused. The hush grew deeper. "Imagine it," he said. "A universe of dark powers pitted against one promising victory for the light." He paused again. "Into this intellectual maelstrom steps the genius of one man. His choice will be the choice for unborn millions."

What a marvelous answer, as dramatic as cowboys and Indians, but with a ring of historical inevitability about it that masked its naive faith. And who knows? Perhaps Toynbee was really describing what he thought of himself and his own role in history. At the time I thought he was talking to me, ordaining me.

"They've been arrested," interrupted Nita who was now pulling me away from the stage. I shrugged, gave a last look at the historian and went with her. It was my doing that Nita was not with her friends. When they ran out, I'd held her back with me and hid with her behind the Ladies Room door until the commotion moved away.

"You drive," she said. "I don't know my way around." She presented me with a set of car keys.

"Do you want to go to the police station?" I asked. "I think it's at Cambridge Square."

"No." She shook her head. "We planned for this. I'm supposed to go back to Brandeis and wait." Tears rolled down her cheeks. "Do you know the way?"

I said yes though I had only a vague idea and we rode around

until I found someone from whom to ask directions to Waltham. We said nothing the whole way. So it wasn't until we were parked in a Brandeis parking lot that she confessed what they were trying to do.

"We wanted to confront him about his anti-semitism," she said. "We wanted to break up the lecture. We almost did."

"Really?" I was stunned. Break up the lecture! I know it's nothing compared to what went on in the Sixties with Viet Nam; the classroom bombings, the attacks on professors. But in the Fifties such a political demonstration on an American campus was unthinkable. "Really?" I repeated. I hadn't understood their intentions at all.

"I'm a coward," Nita sobbed suddenly. "I was the only one left. I should have done something! I sat through the whole thing wanting to. But I couldn't. I'm a coward!"

"My God!" I said.

At that moment the thought of her heckling the voice of history, the very voice that through the Copper Scroll had been calling to me, was almost sickening. It wasn't just the embarrassment she might have caused me, though that was certainly important. I think it was also the realization that she had grown so far from me and was involved in something so alien to me. It seemed she was under a spell. What had happened to Nita?

"I'm a coward," she repeated and took my hand. And with her touch the sickening feeling in my stomach began to subside. Somehow her touch reminded me that she had not acted, that the danger was passed and that she was here alone in a car with me. We were friends again and she needed a friend. She was crying desperately.

"Please," I said, "don't." And I took her in my arms and made the same consoling sounds I'd made just a few years before when we were children, the same sounds as when I'd held her on the cold beach. And just as it had then, our embrace led to other things. In a few moments we were kissing, then touching, our fingers spreading our passion, our mouths tasting the salt on our skin.

I think it was always so with Nita and me. Passion came easily to us. But at what price? I remember a pregnant thirteen year old waiting for her erratic period. I remember the way she used her razor, the neat slashes across the backs of her calves. Freud talks of masochism as the lust for pain, anger inverted, punishment for real or imagined guilt. Whatever the cause, it was always Nita's intensity that got to me, that in many ways spoiled me and made me love her as I've loved no other woman since.

"Get out!" At first I didn't understand. I sat up but didn't see anyone. "Get out!" I was looking at Nita. She was looking over

my shoulder, a horrified expression on her face. I felt something pulling at my back.

Then I was outside, he standing before me, his black hat silver in the moonlight, his blonde beard a metallic mass. He's come for the car, I told myself and offered the keys that were in my hand. He seemed startled. Then he reached for them, my pipe lighter in his hand. Fair exchange, I thought. But his hand continued past mine.

"Traitor!" he hissed and my own lighter, his big fingers folded tightly around it, crashed against my stomach. Then it was I who seemed to hiss, slowly fall and hiss, breath escaping uncontrollably, none entering. I remember the asphalt hitting me even harder than he had, jarring me almost unconscious. But the need to breathe was too great and I wouldn't let myself go under.

So I focussed on my lighter that he'd thrown down next to me. I grasped its silver shape and pulled myself up around it. I'd never been punched before, not like that. I felt unbounded rage. A traitor! To what? To whom? Of course I understand now what he meant. But then it seemed so unjust and unreasonable. What did it have to do with Nita and me? What loyalty did I owe him?

"Kill me!" I heard off in the darkness. It was Nita's voice. "Kill me! I'm a whore! A coward! Kill me!"

Still struggling to breathe, I managed to get to my feet. The moonlight glimmered through the branches and I staggered toward the sound of her voice. I remember not knowing where I was going. But my rage had turned to something else and I was only afraid he would hurt her as he'd hurt me. Then I fell again, sliding, sprawling over the frozen earth. The cold air burned my lungs. And there they were below me in a clearing, a kind of natural amphitheater, Nita standing in moon-light, the large young man to one side, in shadow, like a judge.

Somehow it all became stillness, the bright, dark stillness of a Rousseau dream painting. And in that dream Nita brings her right hand up to her face and moves it across her right cheek, then her left. And with each movement her flesh pulls away from her fingernails. I didn't understand. What was she doing? And it wasn't until the lines made by her fingernails thickened and coalesced and her face shone with the rich darkness of her own blood and she was on her knees tearing at her flesh, that I understood. Even now I'm astounded by the beauty of Nita's act.

Yes, beauty. It's the only word I can use to describe the feeling it evokes in me. Freudians would explain Nita by her personal history; guilt for a fetus flushed down a toilet, for a father jailed for selling blood on the black market, for a mother who drank and entertained men. But to me she was more than that. Imagine coming upon Oedipus in the agony of his contrition. Why would

that be so beautiful? Because he does it to himself. Self-punishment is the first proof of moral governance at work in the universe. It's why I'm writing this now.

Of course, that night I couldn't see the beauty of it. All it meant to me then was that she loved him more. She'd never done anything like that for me. And I remember him stepping out of the shadows to kneel beside her as he tried to wipe her face with his handkerchief. Finally he was just holding her, then leading her away. And I remember wanting to follow them, to run down on them and smash them with my fists. Both of them. But I didn't. I didn't do anything. I was afraid. And I think I knew then I was being childish.

I'd always taken a sadist's pride in her masochism and loved her as a little boy would love, cruelly. It was the only love of which I was then capable and I remember getting up, holding on to an icy tree trunk, weeping with rage and vowing never to see her again. And I didn't, not until eight years later anyway. It was at a party she was giving at her Greenwich Village apartment. The winter of 1963. I was already divorced and had just spent a month in the desert. I was only back in the States to see the publication of my first book.

Nita found out I was in town and called to congratulate me and to ask me to a party she was giving for a friend. At first I didn't want to go. But she seemed to want me there so badly, I quickly said yes and brought a young Bennington dancer I'd met at another party and drank too much wine and spoke to my cousin for a long time in her kitchen. I remember she was thinner than ever. But what she'd done to her face that night in the Brandeis woods had left no scars. My face, on the other hand, had changed remarkably.

"What happened to you?" she asked with concern. My hand went to my forehead and touched first one side, then the other, as if I was beginning the sign of the cross.

"I tried to rescue someone from a burning a house."

"You?" she asked. Such an act was not in the character of the self-centered boy she'd grown up with.

"Yes, me." I smiled. "But it was a false alarm. I got burned for nothing." She reached out and touched my scars. Each the size of a quarter, they were just above my temples.

"They make you look like Michelangelo's Moses." She smiled as she said it.

"I'm a pretty tame Moses," I said, my right hand going up to my right scar. "My horns have been polled." I thought she'd laugh but she looked away. "What about your Judaism?" I asked. I think I was really asking about him, what she thought of him now, the one who had hit me.

"I'm not . . . " She shook her head sadly, put out her cigarette by running tap water on it, then threw it into an empty grocery sack on the floor. Almost immediately she lit another. "I'm seeing a shrink again," she said.

"Oh?"

"I tried to kill myself." She looked up. "I guess you heard." But I hadn't. I'd been in the desert. Though I knew it had always been in her, nevertheless it was shocking news and brought my guard down even lower so that toward the end of our conversation, I told her I loved her, that I always had and always would.

"And I you, Roger," she replied, tears in her eyes. "I was never happier than when I was with you." But after only three puffs she put out her cigarette and again, from the pack she held in her hand, took another. Then she was opening and closing drawers. When I realized she was looking for a match, I produced my Beattie.

"Your lighter," she said as she pulled my hand to her face to inhale the fire before it jetted. I still wonder about that moment. Was it seeing the lighter in conjunction with her hand and face or was it because she declared her love for me as easily as she blew smoke? Whatever the reason, I was again reminded of the night of the Toynbee lecture and him, the young man for whom she had ripped her flesh.

"That's not true," I snarled. "You loved him more! A fanatic! A religious fanatic!"

How small I was! What a terrible, cowardly thing to say! For not fifteen minutes before she told me he'd been reported missing in Israel in the 1956 War, his body never found. It's been seven years, she said. I used to dream of him and talk to him and when I'd wake up I'd be sure he was still alive. She said it was after those dreams stopped that she tried to kill herself.

Now she was looking at me, first in amazement, then confusion and finally, anger. Her hands trembled and she threw the just lit cigarette into the sink. Our eyes met. I saw fire in hers and thought for a moment she would rip her face, that she was about to do it for me. But Nita didn't do anything. Or rather she took another cigarette, then my lighter and again brought the flame near her face.

"Would you like to stay here tonight?" she asked. With each word smoke slipped from her mouth. I nodded. I was full of desire for her.

But when I left the kitchen a few minutes later I found my Bennington dancer and fled. Why? At the time I wasn't really sure. I know I wanted to stay. There had once been so much pleasure between us. Then why did I leave? I think it had something to do with the way she asked me. A slyness in her

voice. Was I afraid of that? Perhaps. But I also felt how much she loved me and I knew that no matter what happened, Nita would never harm what she loved.

Then was I afraid of what I might have done to her, afraid that with my still seething anger and jealous passion, I might have revealed to my cousin her lover's fate, told her the story I'm going to tell now and forced her to her ultimate self-punishment? Even so, why didn't I stay? Why didn't I let whatever would happen, happen? The answer's obvious. I've already given it. I was afraid. I still am. But now I must tell. I must put on paper what happened and the terrible things I did.

Earl Ganz